



# radical democracy

interview:

**Bob Moses**

civil rights organizer

CORE/SNCC/MFDP

#freedommovement

#freedomsummer

#algebraproject





## Robbie Cohen interviews Bob Moses

Bob Moses was a major leader and organizer in the US Civil Rights Movement, serving as field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC], director of SNCC's Mississippi Project for voter education and registration, and was a founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party [MFDP]. He is director and founder of the Algebra Project, promoting the right of every child to a quality public school education. He is a MacArthur Fellowship recipient, and author of *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*.

In this interview, Moses contrasts his mentor **Ella Baker's** focus on local organizing and developing local leaders with Dr. Martin Luther King's strategy of addressing and mobilizing the country around large, national events. He also talks about Fannie Lou Hamer's appearance at the Democratic Convention in 1964, organizing in rural Mississippi, and why simply registering poor Blacks to vote was a radical act in the early 60s.

Robbie Cohen is a professor of history and social studies in at NYU's Steinhardt School, where he developed and runs the History in the Classroom Project, of which this interview is a part. Published with special permission, the entire 2011 interview can be watched on video **here**.

**#radicaldemocracy**

## Bob Moses Interview con't

**Robbie Cohen:** Teachers often tell me their students know a lot about Dr. Martin Luther King, but not about other people involved in the Freedom Struggle. In your book *Radical Equations*, you start not with Dr. King but with Ella Baker. Could you talk about why she's important, why she was important to you in the early SNCC, and what you learned from her?

**Bob Moses:** There were really two very different dimensions to the movement – one symbolized by King, the other symbolized by Ella. The difference is that one really spoke to the nation from national events that became national platforms, and were the sort of events that mobilized the nation: Birmingham, the March on Washington, Selma to Montgomery.

King became a media person, like the President of the Civil Rights Movement. Think of the President of the country as a media person —whenever he says something, it's a media event. King became that kind of person for the Civil Rights Movement, an extremely important role in terms of the way the nation responds and is able to jolt itself along and move from this way to that way. That was not accidental.

I came into a different way of thinking in the summer of 1960 when Ella was still the executive secretary of King's organization. That summer they replaced her—

## Bob Moses Interview con't

King and SCLC decided they were going to develop a strategy around these kinds of events, and Ella didn't agree with that and could not have been the person to head up an organization that was moving in that direction. So Wyatt Tee Walker came down from Virginia to head up the organization.

**RC:** In contrast, Ella wanted to focus on developing student leaders and organizing share croppers, right?

**BM:** I think you can see Ella's idea in the way the Sit-In Movement gained its organizational expression, its organizational manifestation, in SNCC. **It wasn't a given that there would be an autonomous, independent student-run organization that came out of the Sit-In Movement, and you have to really look to Ella as the person that planted that idea, and was strong enough, powerful enough, to give it a chance to happen.**

The other organizations — NAACP, CORE, SCLC — were looking to have student wings of their organization come out of this, by taking this energy and bringing it into the organization as a student wing. But to create a space within the constellations of Civil Rights organizations, so that a new Civil Rights organization could emerge that really incorporated the leadership of the Sit-In Movement itself, you have to give Ella the credit for that.



## Bob Moses Interview con't

The country hasn't caught up with the history. But the country does this about all of its history — not just the Civil Rights history. It does not do a good job of showing that the country's history is as equally about the tough issues of slavery and Jim Crow as it is about revolution and freedom. The idea of painting a facade over the history, that's a problem. Even *Eyes on the Prize*—Henry Hampton did an enormous service in bringing forth this history, but had a decision to make: If we're going to have something that actually captures a TV audience, we have to limit what we cover to what got on TV. And what got on TV were the big events.

**RC:** Or big speeches, rather than organizing people door-to-door...

**BM:** That was not on TV. What makes a speech a *big* speech is that it's part of some huge event, so you got a very slanted picture of the Civil Rights Movement. In that format you weren't going to be able to understand what Ella did, or understand the work for three years — '61, '62, and '63 — that made Freedom Summer in Mississippi possible.



**#radicaldemocracy**

## Bob Moses Interview con't

**RC:** Getting embedded in the communities and really organizing things on a daily basis.

**BM:** All of that work. The other part of **what Ella was always talking about with King, and then with the students, was the need to develop the local leadership, the grassroots leadership.** It became clear in Mississippi that there's only so much media space. The question is, who's going to enter into that media space?

Ella didn't enter that media space herself, but she helped create the conditions so that eventually SNCC people *could* enter into that media space. But even SNCC didn't get its first media person until Stokely [Carmichael] raised Black Power in 1966. SNCC in this phase from 1960 to 1966 had been working under Ella's philosophy of helping to create grassroots leadership. SNCC didn't occupy the media space of Mississippi, but events propelled various people into it.

Tragically, when Medgar [Evers] was assassinated, he entered into that media space. In the local Mississippi media space were different figures SNCC helped put up, running people for Congress — R.L.T. Smith was an early one, and Aaron Henry.



## Bob Moses Interview con't

**BM:** Then Ed King, running for governor, and finally the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and the whole, huge media event, the 1964 Democratic National Convention, where Fannie Lou Hamer emerges. Part of the reason she could emerge was that there was a vacuum in that media space, right? There had been no one to actually capture that media space, and the idea from the beginning was that somebody has to grow and come into it.

**With Fannie Lou Hamer, it was her authenticity, the life she had led which she could now elaborate on national TV. You couldn't fake that.**

Dr. King couldn't do what she did at that Convention. King was there, and actually testified before the credentials committee. But there is no way any testimony he made could actually have the impact that Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony had, because she lived what she was talking about. King could go and describe what other people had lived, but that's not the same. You're light years away from the emotional impact she carried. Same with these kids in the classroom: the only way we're going to break through on this issue of education is [with] the kids themselves — the voices the nation can actually understand and hear.

**#radicaldemocracy**

**RC:** Fannie Lou Hamer seems like another good alternative to just focusing on King's speech. Her testimony at the 1964 Democratic Convention is very powerful, and a way of finding a whole window onto what the Movement was like at the grassroots level. Her speeches are all available on University of Mississippi Press, and would be a really good thing for teachers to use.

**BM:** There's now documentation and evidence, so people could relate through her to a process that was quite deliberate. Which traces back to Ella. **When I think about what we were trying to do in Mississippi, I see we were trying to do for sharecroppers what Ella had done for the students — create a space so their leadership and their energy could emerge.** That's what SNCC in Mississippi ended up doing for sharecroppers in the Delta, in this little time capsule, and out of that you got Fannie Lou Hamer.

**RC:** Often the history of SNCC is told in the context of the youth revolt in the '60s. But in *Quality Education as a Constitutional Right* you stress a cross-generational collaboration, noting that SNCC organizers in Mississippi owe a debt to **Amzie Moore** and that older generation of "race men" who had for years courageously battled Jim Crow. Can you elaborate on that, and on why



## Bob Moses Interview con't

teachers and students should recognize these older people's roles in the Freedom Movement?

**BM: The Freedom Rides** really opened up the movement in Mississippi. It was dramatic. I was there the summer before, in 1960, and came back in the summer of '61 after the rides had landed, and there was a difference in just how a young kid would look at me walking the street. **In the summer of '60 I was just some stranger who was coming to their little town. In the summer of '61, I was a Freedom Rider.**

The Freedom Rides had really penetrated the consciousness of the Black population in Mississippi. But then you look at what was the result – what could they do around their actual strategy of using direct action to open up the state? They were shut out, because their only choice was to do the Nelson Mandela – jail, no bail. So they tried to start a direct nonviolent action campaign.

One wing of SNCC – Diane Nash and the students Jim Lawson had trained in Nashville – insisted that the Freedom Rides would go on. They got to Mississippi determined to set up this strategy around direct action and nonviolence. Direct action is also a way to lead: you

**#radicaldemocracy**



## Bob Moses Interview con't

do the direct action yourself and get other young people to do it, too. **Direct action really was a youth-led, youth-involved strategy.**

There wasn't a strong enough Black middle class in Mississippi to give the kind of support that they had in Tennessee or in Atlanta, where they could post bonds, had property, and so forth. The other problem was that the middle class was embedded in the NAACP, and they were against this. So they didn't have a buffer zone and they didn't have a legal dimension, in terms of whether or not they could get help from the federal government. They got sort of back-handed help from the Kennedy administration to get them *into* Mississippi, but that was the end of that. They couldn't establish a beachhead. The importance of someone like Amzie was that he understood that the strategy for penetrating Mississippi would not be that kind of strategy.

**RC:** Did he teach you that? This analysis you're making — did you realize that at the time, or did that come from him?



## Bob Moses Interview con't

**BM:** I mean, I'm a twenty-six year-old out of Harvard. What do I know about Mississippi? I didn't even know there was a congressional district that was majority Black, in terms of potential registrants. So I'm learning. I'm on a really steep learning curve. **My best asset is that I'm really open to listening and learning** from somebody like Amzie. He's like my father, with this broad outlook and deep experience based on the life he's lived in Mississippi, where he has set himself up so that the purpose of his life is to figure out how to change Mississippi. He recognizes in young people the energy needed to do that, and he directs it. No need to try public accommodations and all of that, but he really single-mindedly focuses on this issue about the politics and the right to vote.

**RC:** If you don't understand Mississippi, you might have this idea that direct action is more militant, more radical than voting, when in the Mississippi context it's not —

**BM:** Here's the problem. **Registering people to vote is not radical per se, any more than teaching math is. What was radical was registering sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta – because that couldn't happen unless you overturn the politics.** What's radical in math



## Bob Moses Interview con't

**BM:** is teaching the kids at the bottom. If you get them up to the top, that will change a lot. So SNCC was split on that issue. Amzie's insight was that this was something that can eventually penetrate the Mississippi power structure. You have an aid here, you have the federal government, which can — and actually did — provide what I came to think of as a crawlspace. Mississippi could lock us up, but they couldn't throw the key away.

**The '57 Civil Rights Act that nobody thought had any teeth turned out to have at least one tooth – and that turned out to be just enough.** It didn't, as the Louis Allen documentary shows, put you in a place where you were free from actual terrorism, so people were going to die. But they couldn't lock you down. And that's they did with the nonviolent direct action in Mississippi, they just locked it down: tied up all these Freedom Riders, kept them coming back to this interminable court process. If you went home on bond, they just told you to come back here in two months. They just kept them coming back, and weren't ever going to settle these cases. They used their court system to tie up money and people and resources.

**#radicaldemocracy**



## Bob Moses Interview con't

If you think you're going to do this direct action, are you ready to just put your two feet on that jail room floor for a long, long period of time? Until 1957, there wasn't a tool to deal with that.

It turned out that the tool was voter registration.

**We had to focus enough on the Feds side so that every time we got in jail it was clear that it was related to voting, and then they could come in.**

There was no legal aid: there were what, three Black lawyers in Mississippi? It was in McComb that Mr. Owens — we called him “Super Cool Daddy” — really drummed into my mind that it was crucial in Mississippi for all the organizations to agree on what they were working on. He would say to me, “Bob, I’m in SNCC, I’m in CORE, I’m in SCLC, I’m in NAACP. I’m in anything that’s going to get this monkey off my back, and we all have to be working on the same thing.”

So there was a consensus about working on the right to vote, and the consensus lasted right up until the Freedom Democratic Party in 1964. It was clear then that we were going to get access, because some people got access to high places in the national Democratic Party. So **it's clear that this system has fissures and is about to crack apart.**



## Bob Moses Interview con't

You had to do something that gained the respect of Amzie's generation, the ones that really had stood up during and after World War II, and then the Brown decision. Because that's how you lived. You lived in their houses with their families because there was no money coming in, so you couldn't say, "Oh, we're going to rent this place, and we're going to set up shop here." You were literally living in the communities off the few families that were ready to actually declare, in this public sense, "We are in this struggle."

**RC:** Sometimes the Kennedys are thought of as being on the sidelines during this time. On the other hand, you have John Doar, who seems to be somebody you can appeal to. How did you think about it at the time? It seems that there's somebody that you can call, or at least threaten to call, but there's limits to what they'll do.

**BM:** You have to understand what it is the federal government is willing to do, how they are working on this problem from the point of view of the Justice Department, of the Kennedy administration. Your job is working on the same problem from the point of view of the farmers and the sharecroppers. When John Doar shows up at Steptoe he's welcomed like a



## Bob Moses Interview con't

hero, because he's somebody who actually carries some weight, as opposed to myself and other SNCC people.

The idea that the federal government can reach down to Amite County, that's a powerful idea. You're not trying to, in the eyes of Steptoe, put down the federal government. **There's a really deep sense that I'm a citizen of the country, and it's substantive. Being a citizen of the country means something. It's not just a formality.** So I'm really looking to the federal government to guarantee my rights, things I'm entitled to as a citizen. I'm not looking to SNCC for that. I mean, SNCC can't do that. SNCC can send somebody down here, and accompany me to try to register to vote, but if people get clubbed over the head, what can SNCC do, right? They can bring more people, they can ask the federal government to see whether they will intervene — or not. Because the people are thinking of themselves not as citizens of Mississippi primarily, but as citizens of the country.

Yes, you can make a press release, and get on the Attorney General for not doing A, B, C, but that has nothing to do with the reality of what you're doing on the ground, and who you are actually counting on to



## Bob Moses Interview con't

keep Mississippi from exercising state power to crush you.

**RC:** This seems very important. There is sometimes a tendency in classrooms to be dismissive about federal involvement because of problems of the Kennedys and what happened with Johnson. What you're saying is more complicated than just writing this off: That having the federal government there mattered. For all its reluctance, or not being able to do what the Movement wanted it to do, at least there was something there to appeal to.

**BM:** I never thought we would be looking to the federal government for protection. The idea of protecting people who were trying to register to vote, I always thought that was part of the terrain if you're coming to Mississippi and you're going to do this work. It certainly hit home when Herbert Lee was gunned down that this is part of *our* job. The way I came to think about it later was that **you have to earn your insurgencies in this country, and we actually earned our insurgency in Mississippi at three different levels.**

One was earning the right to actually ask the sharecroppers, the farmers, to go down and register.



## Bob Moses Interview con't

Because they put themselves in danger: some of them were murdered, there were a lot of reprisals. Why should they do that just because we asked them to? **We had to, basically, get knocked down to stand back up. They had to decide that we were people worth taking this risk with. We had to earn that right. You couldn't take that for granted.**

Then we had to earn the respect of the Justice Department — lawyers in the Civil Rights division — that we were really doing this work, voter registration, and that we were people they could put on the stand. Because if you don't have a credible person to put on the stand, you're undermining what you're trying to do. We had to be credible for them to automatically turn that key so you weren't spending months in jail. If they arrested you on the voter registration thing, then they were sending people down and getting us out, and moving the case to the federal courts.

That sent a very clear signal to the people we were working with that we weren't there just by ourselves. That was extremely important for them to understand: that we were not there just by ourselves, that there were people from the Justice Department who were on our side around this issue.



## Bob Moses Interview con't

Finally, we had to earn the right to call on the whole country to come in and take a close look at what's going on here. Because they got on top of us — for the idea that we were trying to cause another Civil War down here. And if there was any way to make that argument stick, it wouldn't have happened. But they couldn't make it stick. We had gone through all of that terror ourselves and so there was no way to make an argument that this was just something someone thought of to cause this country to tear itself apart.

**Our job was to mount an earned insurgency. We had to earn it at all these levels in order to actually make it happen.**

**RC:** For many people, when they think of images of the '60s, they think of Black Power or SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] with the student movement. It seems like the early SNCC work is well known and considered important to historians like myself, but with the general population it remains undefined. How would you define what you were doing?



## Bob Moses Interview con't

**BM:** Well, it was problematic within SNCC, and within the country. It was problematic within SNCC that eight hundred mostly white students came in and brought the country with them. It's part of the paradox and the dilemma and the contradiction: **Louis Allen's and Herbert Lee's murders could not get anybody's attention, but Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney got everybody's attention.** And this was problematic within SNCC itself. It didn't go down well, the idea that you really have to call in the country to change this state. Black people can't do it by themselves, they can't move this whole country. They can be the instigators of something that eventually moves it, but to move it, the majority people in the country have to move, right?

That was problematic and it's still problematic – it goes on to this day. The country as a whole has never been able to acknowledge the students who came down and what they did. There's no organization able to say, "These are our people and this is what they did." Black Power was much more forceful, and did for SNCC what it hadn't done before: it gave us national media people. First Stokely [Carmichael], then Rap Brown.



## Bob Moses Interview con't

If you think about the country at the time, you had two different kinds of media space around the Movement. King was occupying one, and Malcolm [X] was occupying another. When Malcolm is assassinated, his space is a vacuum until Black Power arises. Stokely steps into that space, and then Rap Brown steps into that space. Now President Obama is in King's space, and you got Sharpton and somebody else in the other space.

**RC:** Early SNCC inspired the New Left and SDS, and yet you were not like mainstream liberals. You were redefining this new radicalism, yet maybe because it wasn't a media thing, there's not a label — "Bob Moses and early SNCC was X, was Y." In terms of the historical memory, there's not even a label to talk about it in terms of how important and meaningful democratic organizing is, which seems kind of strange to me.

**BM:** Well, what are the organizing traditions? Think of Saul Alinsky and IAF [Industrial Areas Foundation] and that organizing tradition. A couple of weeks ago I was in LA and there's a professor at Occidental College, he's a mathematician, but also part of the IAF effort in that area. Ernie Cortes runs it. They host the Algebra Project in LA and have something called One LA.

**#radicaldemocracy**



## Bob Moses Interview con't

So we were in a meeting at Occidental, and one of his students has really taken on this Algebra Project effort, and organizing students and so forth. He was wrestling with the issue of the difference between what he called “place-based organizing” and “issue-based organizing,” and seeing the Algebra Project as an issue-based organizing effort. And what he’s been involved with, for close to a couple of decades, is place-based organizing around IAF in this particular area of Los Angeles.

Mississippi in some senses was both place-based and issue-based. The way the organizers had to work, they had to settle in one place, find a family or a base, and stay there and get known. But they were working around really one big issue: access to the right to vote. When that sort of movement and effort collapsed, that sort of organizing — I’m not sure it took hold again.

**The country really doesn’t organize itself. It mobilizes itself periodically around different issues.** Really understanding what happened then, and how it relates to what needs to go on now — we’re wrestling with that question within the Algebra Project. How does the issue that we’re talking about — quality public school education — interface with people doing community organizing? We haven’t found a real answer, or a real strategy. In some senses, it’s a new dimension for America.

## Bob Moses Interview con't

**RC:** It almost redefines what democracy is. It doesn't make major events, it's not that visible, and you have to go to grassroots to see it happening, to understand what Mario Savio called "hyper-democracy," organizing people at the grassroots. Because it wasn't a big media event, it's almost as if the history has not been appreciated the way that these grand media events have been. And it seems like it's a form of radicalism.

**BM:** Well, again, what was radical was doing voting with the sharecroppers.

**RC:** The context made it radical.

**BM:** Yeah, the context made it radical. But also what made it radical was its importance. The importance was part of a historical wave — World War II, overthrowing colonialism. This is our internal colonial set-up inside the United States. We're part of this huge, planet-wide movement, and tied up with the question of the Cold War and Russia, and exploitation — all of that.

In a similar sense, I think this issue about math literacy is also tied up with this planet-wide movement from industrial to information-age technology. We see the impact of it all around us, in terms of the different financial arrangements and the skewing of the population economically. It's more difficult figuring out how this transition is actually going to deepen the democracy in the country, because every indicator is that just the opposite is happening.



## Bob Moses Interview con't

**RC:** It seems that there's continuity: In both cases, you're dealing with disenfranchised people, first by voting and now by having access to the technological age through algebra and math.

**BM:** Right. But the thing is, **the disenfranchised people now are a much broader subclass of the country, including all geographical domains.**

**RC:** I guess a label doesn't exist for it, but organizing the disenfranchised at the grassroots, in a democratic way, is radical.

**BM:** **The current conversation about school reform really does not encompass the idea that the kids at the bottom should rise. The idea is that, well, they should at least be able to work at Walmart or something.** But the idea that we are going to actually install an education system for these kids, so they can really access this information technology, and the economies that are going to grow from this — that's not on the table.

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*This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.*